

WASHINGTON, D.C. - A bill introduced by Congressman Sam Farr (D-Carmel) that will authorize funding for recovery and research efforts to support the Southern sea otter received a hearing on Thursday before the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Oceans and Wildlife.

"Sea otters are iconic to the Central Coast and vital to the health of our oceans," Rep. Farr said. "They're like canaries in mines. Sea otters get sick from the same things humans get sick from, so they serve a public health role. We hunted these creatures to near-extinction, and its time we focus on repairing that damage."

Five experts testified before the subcommittee, offering prepared remarks and answering questions from Rep. Farr and other members. The hearing is part of the information-gathering process that occurs before a bill is considered for a vote.

The legislation, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act (H.R. 3639), would require the Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to carry out a recovery program to include protection of existing populations, reduction of human activities that limit population growth, monitoring and analysis of otter populations and public outreach about human effects on otters.

The Southern subspecies of sea otters has seen some recent growth, but recovery has never increased at the species' maximum potential of 17 to 20 percent per year, typical of recovery of the northern subspecies.

The bill would:

- Establish a Southern Sea Otter Health Assessment Plan to assess causes of population decline
- Promote ecosystem sustainability by identifying key threats to ecosystem health and ways to mitigate those impacts
- Award competitive research grants.

Five experts testified before the subcommittee:

- D. Kenneth McDermond, deputy regional director, Fish and Wildlife Service's California and Nevada Regional Office
- Jim Curland, marine program associate, Defenders of Wildlife
- James Estes, director, STEPS Institute, University of California-Santa Cruz
- Andrew Johnson, program manager, Sea Otter Research and Conservation, Monterey Bay Aquarium
- George Mannina, senior partner, O'Connor and Hannan, L.L.P.

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